





PITTSBURGH BRANCH  
PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

308 South Craig Street  
Pittsburgh 13, Pennsylvania

1910

1960



for the support and promotion  
*of the*  
interests of the blind  
*and the*  
prevention of unnecessary blindness

PHOTO CREDITS: Braille, Checkers—*Mahoney*;  
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Shop, Brush and Contract Departments—*Berman*,  
Sun-Telegraph; Sewing Room—*Jay Bee*; Tele-  
phone Sales—*Francis*; Switchboard—*PBX CALL*.

# INTRODUCTION

Of the 345,000 blind persons in our country, approximately 3,000 reside in Allegheny County. Not all are totally blind. The basic definition of blindness is expressed as a visual acuity, or distance vision, of 20/200. More simply, an individual is considered legally blind if at a distance of twenty feet he sees what a person with normal vision sees at two hundred feet.

Historically, blindness has been set apart from other physical disabilities as an affliction rather than a handicap. For centuries, most blind people were forced to live under social restrictions imposed by belief that blindness was an unmitigated tragedy, rendering the victim helpless, useless, and insensible. Comparatively few broke these bonds of ignorance to lead near-normal lives and to make names for themselves.

Today, while the nature of blindness remains unchanged—a severe handicap which may strike any one at any time—attitudes and beliefs have undergone marked transformation. Blindness is being viewed in its true light: tragic, yes, but a handicap rather than an affliction; one that can be overcome, to a great extent, by concentrating on remaining senses and capabilities.

This transformation has opened the way for blind people to live more normally in seeing society, and has led to an ever-widening acceptance of the fundamental truth that blind people are normal people functioning under abnormal visual circumstances.

# YESTERDAY...

Understanding and acceptance notwithstanding, the seeing world still is reluctant to consider blind persons fully employable.

Just as this is true now, so it was at the turn of the century, when blind adults found themselves forced into occupational dead-ends. Graduates of schools for the blind could not find employment, and newly-blinded adults had no access to retraining or employment. Schools for the blind were faced with the unfortunate task of refusing repeated requests from blind adults for assistance or for permanent refuge.

## FIRST ROOTS

Statistics showed an estimate of between 6,000 and 7,000 blind adults in Pennsylvania at that time; and so great was the pressure imposed by these forgotten individuals that Phoebe J. (Mrs. Moses) Ruslander, of the Pittsburgh Council of Jewish Women, surveyed the local problem with the help of William Wightman Blair, M.D. In consequence, her appeal to the Congress of Women's Clubs effected appointment of a committee on work for the blind under her chairmanship. In January, 1910, less than a year later, Pittsburgh Association for the Adult Blind was organized, to be re-titled The Pennsylvania Association for the Blind the following June.

One of its first aims being establishment of workshops, the Association made an appeal to the city government. The resultant appropriation of \$10,000 facilitated the January, 1911 opening of Pittsburgh Workshop for the Blind—in the old Grace Church on Webster Avenue—under the direction of a committee appointed by the mayor. Although Association and Workshop had no official connection then, several persons were members of both boards. Common goals, plus the sharing of quarters and staff, established close co-operation between these two organizations. From the very beginning, both exerted maximum effort toward fulfillment of stated aims, which have remained basically unchanged through this half-century.

During 1911, the new workshop grew to a complement of more than fifty blind workers. The Association pursued its course of aid to aged and indigent blind persons and strong activity in the realm of prevention of blindness, the effect of which already was being felt. Public education toward the need of prophylaxis for ophthalmia neonatorum, or babies' sore eyes, then the leading cause of blindness, was the first victory.

Growth and increasing public acceptance, along with city redevelopment plans, prompted officials to seek permanent headquarters. To facilitate property acquisition and to lay the foundation for desired state-wide expansion, Pennsylvania Association for the Blind was incorporated in May, 1912.

Mrs. Ruslander and Dr. Blair, both vice presidents at the time, were among the charter members.

With incorporation came changes and new programs: Reorganization brought Association and Workshop under one board of directors; location of new quarters assured continuation of all functions under one roof; and plans for expansion began to take form.



**PHOEBE J.  
RUSLANDER**  
Founder  
Vice  
President  
1910—1931  
Honorary  
President  
1931—1939

## PUBLIC INTEREST AWAKENS

Now local business concerns began to show active interest in the Pittsburgh Workshop. A donated salesroom provided the first retail outlet for women's work. During the holiday selling season, total sales from this source and from space donated by two department stores were \$1,033—not a large amount by today's standards (average weekly sales approximate \$3,900)—but a triumph for an infant organization to which each new step was a trial.

With the opening of the first branch in Scranton, in 1913, expansion began. At first things moved slowly; but by 1928, the Association boasted twelve branches in operation. Today the branches number thirty-one.

Financial growth paralleled physical growth. Comparisons of annual budgets involve multiplication instead of addition. For example, the total operating budget, recorded at \$1,964 for 1910, more than doubled by the end of 1911, when the figure of record was \$4,211. By 1915, the budget had increased to \$41,980.



OLD GRACE  
CHURCH  
Original  
Quarters  
1911—1912

**DUQUESNE  
SCHOOL  
Second Home  
1912—1919**



Keeping in mind the fact that, in these years, the Pittsburgh organization included state-wide services, consider the 1958 total operating budget of \$740,500 for Pittsburgh Branch, serving only Pittsburgh and Allegheny County.

There is here, or elsewhere, no implication of comparison of factors other than growth; for most certainly the early services were rendered with competence and were as sorely needed as are the more developed services today.

Pennsylvania Association for the Blind occupied its second home until 1918, when the board purchased a larger building on the Boulevard of the Allies. The celebrated Lillian Russell Moore, who joined the board of directors that year, organized an all-star theatrical benefit which raised \$11,000 to help toward the cost of the \$40,000 building. The Association moved into the new building on July 1, 1919, there to remain until the move, in 1932, to the present site at 308 South Craig Street.

### **AUTONOMY FOR PITTSBURGH**

The exact date of official designation, Pittsburgh Branch, is not recorded. Examination of records sets the approximate time as late 1922, although it was not until 1929 that a separate board of directors was formed and the Branch became autonomous. A revision of the



by-laws was adopted, giving each branch representation on the board of trustees of the separated Association-at-large.

Headquarters of the Association-at-large were moved from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg in 1940.

### LEADERSHIP ROLE

Pittsburgh Branch has maintained a position of national leadership in work for the blind since those first decisive steps taken by Mrs. Ruslander and her associates fifty years ago.

One notable contribution—a leading role in organizing National Industries for the Blind—led to establishment of many new workshops, thereby greatly increasing employment opportunities for blind workers. National Industries for the Blind is the non-profit agency designated to administer the Walsh-Healy Act which requires Federal agencies to purchase certain products from accredited workshops for the blind.

Also, Pittsburgh Branch was one of the first agencies for the blind to establish a retail sales program.

# ...TODAY...

Pittsburgh Branch, Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, a private agency, is responsible to a volunteer board of directors composed of civic-minded business and professional people of Allegheny County. Eleven physicians, serving on the medical advisory committee, give freely of their time. They aid the Association in carrying out its program for the prevention of unnecessary blindness, and act as a liaison between the Association and the medical profession. The agency is dedicated to the prevention of blindness and improvement of conditions for blind residents of Allegheny County.

For verbal expedience, Pittsburgh Branch often is called Pittsburgh's Blind Association, or merely PBA.

Operationally, Pittsburgh Branch is composed of two divisions, Welfare Services and Workshop. Welfare Services are financed completely by the United Fund-Community Chest. The Workshop is mainly self-supporting, its livelihood dependent on the sale of its products, supplemented by a city grant and income from specially designated trust funds. Although autonomous, Pittsburgh Branch works in co-operation with the parent organization and other branches.

## DEVELOPMENT

Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, in its early years, fulfilled its objectives by offering employment to the adult blind, by teaching trades to newly-blinded adults, by administering a program of public education in prevention of blindness, and by acquiring funds to aid aged and indigent blind persons. Although this program produced commendable results, it had shortcomings to be expected in any such new venture.

First, and most important, was the failure to recognize the emotional crises faced by an individual when blindness strikes. Then, too, only a few manual trades were open to blind workers; trades that have become stereotypes identified with blindness: chair caning, rug

weaving, broom and mop manufacture, and others. No matter a man's occupation at the time he lost his sight, he had his choice of these trades or idleness.

As defects in methods became evident, the Association, with other progressive agencies for the blind, searched for corrective solutions. There began the development of broad welfare service programs, and research and experimentation for occupational expansion. With improvement would come better application of the capabilities and talents of blind people, permitting them to follow more closely the lines of activity for which they were best fitted and, consequently, to continue living their daily lives as they had before blindness occurred.

Programs developed rapidly. Today, the field of work for the blind is one of highly specialized activity. Except for those who grew with the profession, people involved in many aspects of the work are and must be trained in their fields. Workshop officials must possess sound business acumen and administrative ability, plus a profound understanding of the problems which accompany blindness.



## WELFARE SERVICES DIVISION

PBA's diversified welfare services are never static. Constant development of new ideas, resources, and equipment creates changes in approach and implementation. Co-ordination with community and allied national agencies and affiliation with professional organizations provide stimulation and inter-relationships which are universally beneficial. Research and routine work have brought to light complexities unthought of fifty years ago.

In contrast to the formative years of the Association, when the 1923 annual report listed a state-wide total of 261 visits to homes, PBA welfare services, in September, 1959, included a total of 1,080 contacts and home visits for one month. During the year of 1959, service was given to 1,913 persons.

## PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS

Of all elements of agency activity, prevention of blindness has been most flexible, due to correlation with medical developments and corresponding changes in causes of blindness. However, this factor affecting prevention programming has not changed:

The incidence still is far too high—more than half of all blindness is preventable; and too many people, still taking for granted the precious sense of sight, are woefully uninformed or misinformed about even the simplest rules for eye care and safety.

Education is a major weapon in the agency's prevention campaign. Films, pamphlets, specially-prepared papers, speeches, lectures, and exhibits are valuable working tools.

Medical social workers are active in a sight conservation program, helping partially-seeing youngsters realize their potentials and furthering understanding of their problems in home and school. PBA maintains a library of large-print school books for loan to these students, and is prepared to help secure recommended magnifying devices and visual aids. Also, to foster normal childhood development, in 1956, the agency initiated a summer day camp for partially-seeing children.



**PARTIALLY-SEEING CAMPERS**  
agree that nothing quite  
matches taste of hot dogs  
cooked over camp fire.

## CASEWORK

One of the basic foundations of an effective welfare service program is an understanding of the myriad problems and uncertainties which confront a newly-blinded individual. Abruptly, his pattern of daily living is changed. He must adapt new routines for such functional actions as dressing, eating, and walking. He may need to combat self-reproach, guilt, shame, or bitterness, all common reactions to



**BRAILLE**, universal system of reading and writing for blind persons, may be transcribed in all languages—is adaptable for music, mathematics, science, and shorthand.

a severe handicap. Countless avenues of service must be demonstrated and opened for his return to near-normal activity. Skilled caseworkers help blind adults and their families with the emotional problems that arise out of accepting and adjusting to blindness.

### HOME TEACHING

Certified home teachers help newly-blinded adults readapt familiar skills and learn new ones, varying their instruction for the needs of individuals in home surroundings. Their training prepares them to give instruction in a staggering number of skills—Braille, typing, personal grooming, foot travel, household chores, and handicrafts of all types. Traveling to the far reaches of the county, home teachers, often blind or partially blind themselves, can provide the spark of inspiration needed to allay fears of newly-blind people and their over-protective families.

**TYPICAL HOT-LUNCH CAFETERIA**, operated by blind and partially-blind adults under PBA supervision. Host companies provide space, facilities—serve own employees through service to handicapped people.



## SPECIAL SERVICES

The needs of all people vary with the individual. One newly-blinded person may want many special devices to bolster his adjustment; another, only routine aids. But be the request for anything from a cane to a Braille-calibrated pressure cooker, or a Talking Book to a TV audio receiver, PBA special services department is prepared to help him obtain it.

## REFRESHMENT STANDS

Employment for blind adults ranges from professional occupations to unskilled labor, depending on individual abilities. PBA Welfare Services Division offers small business opportunities to qualified blind and partially-seeing adults through the refreshment stand department. Varying in service from package snack bars to hot lunch cafeterias, ten Association stands in business and industrial buildings presently provide steady employment for twenty-nine blind and partially-blind men and women trained in management and merchandising.

## RECREATION

Recognizing the importance of diversion and relaxation, the Association includes a recreation program in its general services. Here, blind adults may learn to participate in many popular activities—bowling, swimming, dancing, golf, checkers, card games, and Scrabble, to name a few. Using specially-adapted equipment blind persons can join their seeing friends in these recreational pursuits. Parties, dances, picnics, and club functions are a part of PBA's program. Each blind person may bring a sighted guide, thus providing desired integrated recreation.

## CAFETERIA

In the agency cafeteria, workers, employees, and blind residents of Allegheny County may buy breakfast and hot lunches at cost, and snacks during morning and afternoon coffee breaks.

**CHECKERS** are favorite posttime of many blind persons. Note indented squares — distinctive shapes as well as contrasting colors of opposing pieces.



## WORKSHOP DIVISION



Useful employment, universally recognized as an important human factor, takes on additional significance for blind people. Beyond monetary consideration and fulfillment of the natural desire to create, employment enables the blind worker to become a contributing member of society, rather than its ward. This was the basis for action when Pittsburgh Workshop for the Blind was founded, and it continues to be the motivating force through expansion and development to the Association's present sheltered workshop and non-profit sales organization.

The stated purpose of a sheltered workshop is to provide a training and work center where handicapped people may be given proper vocational training and employment without the stress of competition beyond their limitations.

Although business competition is not the prime concern of any sheltered workshop, PBA must utilize sound business principles, and maintain competitive price and quality standards, in order to serve its basic purposes. The Workshop Division depends on product sales for the bulk of its operating income. To relax quality at any point would result in gradual deterioration of the entire program.

From modest beginnings, the Workshop has experienced considerable growth to its present multifarious operation, which now includes industrial shops, sewing room, contract department, and an expanding sales department.

### INDUSTRIAL STANDARDS MAINTAINED

Conforming to industrial standards, workshop operations are based on a 40-hour week. Machinery is equipped with conventional guards; and careful attention is given to provide sufficient individual work space, ventilation, and lighting. Workers are protected by insurance, and special emphasis is given to safety measures. The inherent safety consciousness of blind workers combines with Association safety precautions to give PBA an excellent safety record.



Of all workshop activities, the oldest and most often associated with blind craftsmen is broom and mop manufacture. In PBA's broom shop, visually-handicapped workers produce top quality brooms at the rate of 80 dozen per day. Mop production ranges from 12-ounce pink handled household mops to massive 36-ounce industrial mops.

In the sewing room, skilled blind seamstresses exhibit productive versatility, now turning out a colorful array of useful household products—laundry items, kitchen necessities, and other decorative home appointments—now working toward completion of a government order, now preparing bean bag bases for the attractive TeleSack ash trays manufactured exclusively by the Association.

An exceptionally well-developed sense of touch is a major resource of the blind worker. In the contract department, blind men and women perform a variety of industrial sub-contract operations—repetitive assembly, gauging, sorting, packaging, bulk mailings, among others—in which manual dexterity is the requisite.

Through these workshop facilities, the Association presently provides employment for 120 to 170 blind adults, depending on the availability of industrial contracts at any given time.





**SKILL AND COMPETENCE** mark work of Association's brush makers. All PBA brushes are hand-made.

Effective internal communications are as important in sheltered workshops as in business and industry. It was to strengthen this line of communication and to further understanding and co-operation that PBA Council was formed. Comprised of five worker delegates, two board members, and three representatives of management, PBA Council holds periodic meetings at which workers' problems and questions are given hearing and pertinent management problems are discussed.



**BLIND WORKERS** assemble individual average of 8,000 bolts and washers per day on one industrial sub-contract operation.

**BLIND TELEPHONE SALESMEN** maintain customer records in Braille — total approximately five hundred calls daily.



Products manufactured and distributed by Pittsburgh Branch, Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, bear the registered SKILCRAFT trade mark. Developed to fill a need for identification of quality blind made merchandise, SKILCRAFT may be used by accredited non-profit agencies for the blind meeting established qualifications.

Because so much of its operating income must come from sales, the important functions of training and employment in telephone and direct sales, retail store activities, and industrial-wholesale contact all originate from the Association's headquarters.

Lions Clubs, which augment agency sales activity with annual club sales of SKILCRAFT products in their home communities, have made a vital contribution to PBA during the past eleven years. Not only do such sales account for approximately twenty-five per cent of PBA's total volume annually; but they help to increase public awareness of the agency and of SKILCRAFT.

PBA holds membership in national and state organizations which oversee equitable distribution of government orders to qualified workshops for the blind and provide for inter-exchange of information and ideas.



## GENERAL OFFICES



Although Welfare Services and Workshop divisions function under separate financial structures, they share the services of several departments.

### PUBLIC RELATIONS

Years ago, PBA decided that need for agency communication with the public justified establishment of a public relations office. A healthy and accurate public image, important to any service agency, is doubly important to the Association; for here must be maintained not only public approval of services but acceptance of products as well. Moreover, there rests with the agency a great responsibility to further public understanding of blindness and its problems, and, through education, to increase public eye consciousness. Responsibilities of the public relations department include publicity, publications, information, public contacts, pamphlet distribution, film library, speakers bureau, and agency tours.



**BRaille TOUCH-PILOT PANEL,** attached to a standard PBX switchboard, enables trained blind operator to handle telephone traffic with speed and efficiency. Dial has no special markings — must be memorized by all blind persons.

## VOLUNTEERS

PBA, whose operating staff is restricted by limited financial resources, leans heavily on another resource of inestimable value: that of volunteer service.

Volunteer workers—individuals and groups—spend countless hours assisting staff personnel in many phases of agency activity. They help process heavy mailings, record reading material and read directly, transcribe printed material to Braille, transcribe music, provide driving service on special occasions.

Several skilled and talented volunteers schedule regular periods for giving instruction in bridge, dancing, golf, ceramics, chess and checkers, and other specialized activities; while recreational volunteers act as bowling scorekeepers and party assistants.

No record of progress could be written were it not for these devoted friends, and PBA's board members, who give unstintingly of their time and effort in the agency's behalf.

## ... and TOMORROW?

While contemplating past records and present performance with understandable pride, the Association is not willing to rest at this milestone on merit. There is much still to be done. Just as the original agency was established as a result of study of the problems of employment of the blind, so now is the future growth of Pittsburgh Branch to be determined by study of unmet needs in the light of existing resources and community plans. The board of directors has appointed a long range planning committee charged with the responsibility for making this study and formulating recommendations.

The first fifty years have seen Pittsburgh Branch, Pennsylvania Association for the Blind surpass envisioned goals of community service. The coming years present a challenge for progress geared to fulfill the dual chartered purposes as stated in the by-laws: "for the support and promotion of the interests of the blind and the prevention of unnecessary blindness."

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